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DIRECT EDITION

NIGHT... AND THE ALLEYWAYS OF LOS ANGELES COME TO LIFE UNDER A COLD, UNFEELING MOON...
...IT'S LIGHT REVEALING THE FORMS OF FOUR TEENAGE HEROES...
...THE DIGITIZED DATAMASTER CALLED LOGNX...
AMOKK WAS CORRECT! THIS FIGHT'S GOTTEN OUT OF HAND!
...THE WINDBENDING MISTRESS KNOWN AS BLISS...
HERE'S WHERE ALL THAT POWER PRACTICE PAYS OFF!
IT'S TIME WE TOOK BACK THE NIGHT, HEROES!
...THE FRENZIED FREAK OF NATURE NAMED AMOKK...
...AND THEIR ERSTWHILE LEADER, THE WOMAN WARRIOR ARMATA!
BUT AS ARMATA'S FISTS BLAZE WITH ENERGY, SHE KNOWS THAT MORNING MAY MEAN THE END OF HER HEROISM...
EEYOWW! LET'S SHOW THESE GANGSTAS SOME REAL STREET VIOLENCE!
HYPERKIND NO MORE

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CREATED BY CLIVE BARKER
FRED BURKE - STORY
FABIO LAGUNA WITH HELP FROM MANUEL FLORES & LUKE ROSS PENCILS
DO 'EM! DO 'EM ALL!
YOU BLOODTHIRSTY SONOVA--
--THE PHARAOHS ARE JUST KIDS!
OLD ENOUGH T'CROSS THE DEACON, OLD ENOUGH T'DIE FOR IT!
SLASH
AMOKK, TAKE OUT AS MUCH HARDWARE AS YOU CAN!
OHMIG-- ONE OF DEACON'S GANGSTAS TOOK THE HIT MEANT FOR ME!
JUST 'NOTHER DEAD LOSER. LET 'EM KILL EACH OTHER!
CLICK!
WE CAN ONLY DODGE BULLETS SO LONG BEFORE--
HABLAM
I... I KILLED HIM...

MIKE HALBIEB
WITH
DAN SCHAEFFER
INKS
STEVE DUTRO
LETTERS
ELAINE LEE
COLORS
MARC McLAURIN
MALCOLM SMITH
CARL POTTS
TOM DeFALCO
EDITS
CONSULTING EDITS
EXECUTIVE EDITS
CHIEF EDITS
AMOKK, THERE IS NO POINT TO ARGUMENT--
--THIS AVENUE OF ESCAPE IS THE MOST LOGICAL ALTERNATIVE!
MAN, WHAT KINDA GAME IS THIS?! FIRST THE GANGSTAS TRY TO 'JACK US WITH GUNS--
--THEN SOME KINDA SUPER HEROES COME TO OUR RESCUE?
THIS IS NO GAME-- NOW GO!
"...FIRST YOU, THEN YOU'RE SLANT-EYED HOMEY, GEORGE YONEDA YOU'RE HISTORY!"
TH-THEY'RE TALKIN' ABOUT ME! THAT DELIVERY I MADE WITH CARLOS, WHEN THE HOODS STOLE THE PRODUCT--
--WE WERE IDIOTS TO GET MIXED UP WITH THAT--
--I BARELY GOT US OUTTA THERE ALIVE! THOUGHT IT WAS OVER-- AND NOW--
--I'LL NEVER GET TO HIM IN TIME!
CARLOS!
BUT THAT'S NOT WHAT WE CAME FOR, CARLOS.
CAME T'WASTE YOUR SORRY BUTT, AN' ALL THE BIG RED MONSTERS INNA WORLD AIN'T GONNA SAVE YOU NOW!
NAW, MAN-- DON'T... DON'T... I DON'T WANNA DIE...
YOU BROUGHT THIS DOWN ON YOUR BROTHER PHARAOHS!
DEACON TRUSTED YOU WITH THAT COKE... NOW YOU FIN' OUT WHAT THE GANGSTAS DO TO THOSE THAT BETRAY...

ENOUGH! HOW MANY KIDS HAVE TO DIE TODAY?!
THIS IS INSANITY!
LADY CAME OUTTA THE SKY--LIKE SHE C'FLY OR SOMETHING!
SAVED MY LIFE!
NO ONE CAN WIN HERE--EXCEPT DEATH!
WHAK
WELL THEN, IT'S TIME YOU MET DEATH, BABY!
WHAM
I'M NOBODY'S "BABY"--AND DON'T YOU FORGET IT!
C'MON, BLISS, WHILE THE OTHERS HANDLE THE GUNS--
--I NEED TO ATTACK THE HEADMAN--THE ONE THEY CALL DEACON!
THEY SAY BEHIND EVERY GREAT MAN... IS A LOT OF FEAR. SO WHAT DO YOU FEAR MOST, DEACON?
COCAINE HAS MADE THESE YOUNGSTERS OUR SLAVES--WE MUST NOT BE AFRAID TO USE THE WHIP!
THESE PHARAOHS MUST BE TAUGHT A LESSON... OR PERHAPS YOU, IN THEIR PLACE.
I'LL... I'LL TAKE CARE OF IT, MADAME WOE. I'LL WIPE THE WHOLE GANG IF I HAVE TO...
DEACON'S DRUG-RUNNING BOSS... IS MADAME WOE?
" WHAT HAVE WE GOTTEN OURSELVES INTO?"
CARLOS, ARE YOU OKAY, MAN?
YEAH, I... HEY... YOU KNOW MY NAME?

PLEASE, I MUST ADVISE IMMEDIATE EVACUATION!
I'M GOIN... BUT I KNOW YOU, BLADE-MAN. I KNOW I DO...
THIS WAY, KID. PEOPLE HAVE DIED FOR KNOWING LESS...
A FOOLISH SLIP, GEORGE. YOU'RE GOING TO BLOW ALL OUR SECRETS...
THERE'S NO DOUBT-- THAT'S MADAME WOE I READ IN HIS DREAM-MY BOSS AT THE UNDERGROUND!
SHE'S THE KEY TO HOW THIS STARTED--
--IT'S ONLY FAIR I USE MY DREAM-DISGUISE TO HELP HER END IT.
Hrm... DEACON! YOU'VE SERVED OUR CAUSE WELL! NOW uh, BEGONE FROM HERE!
WHA--MADAME WOE?! BUT WHAT ABOUT THESE CREATURES? THEY--
Um, LEAVE THESE THINGS TO ME! NOW GO!
HAH--MY RUSE WORKED! WE DID IT AGAIN, GUYS!
DID WHAT, BLISS? STUMBLED INTO SOMETHING WE KNEW NOTHING ABOUT?
AS USUAL?
ONLY THIS TIME, PEOPLE DIED BECAUSE OF IT. BECAUSE OF ME...
WAIT-- WHAT ABOUT THE DOG, ECKA?!
M-MAYBE IF WE SEEK HIM OUT, WITH HIS FIFTH POWER OF CONSCIOUSNESS, MAYBE HE COULD...
BRING THEM BACK TO LIFE? DEATH IS DEATH BLISS. NO MORE, AND NEVER ANY LESS...

HEY, YOU GOTTA LOOK AT THE BIG PICTURE, ARMATA.
WHEN HE PASSED THE OHO POWERS ON TO US, ESCHBACHER SAID WE HAD TO FIGHT TO PRESERVE OUR WORLD.
MY TIP ON THIS MEET SAVED A LOT MORE LIVES THESE KILLERS WOULD'VE TAKEN. THE PHARAOHS DESERVED A SECOND CHANCE.
SO DID THESE GUYS...
NO MATTER WHAT WE DO WITH OUR POWERS, IT'S NEVER ENOUGH...
ARMATA, WE CAN'T CHANGE THE WORLD OVERNIGHT!
WE MAY NEVER BE ABLE TO CHANGE IT COMPLETELY AT ALL...
KAKRESH!
KHOOM
THEN WHAT RIGHT DO WE HAVE TO KEEP THESE POWERS?!

" BEFORE HE DIED, ESCHBACHER SAID THE POWERS WERE HIS...
" ...THAT HE'D CHOSEN M--US TO CARRY ON THE PAXIS LEGACY, AGAINST THE MONSTER-- THERMAKK -- WHO WANTED TO STEAL THEM.
" THERMAKK SAID HE NEEDED THE POWERS TO PROTECT OTHER WORLDS, OTHER GALAXIES, FROM AN INTERGALACTIC WAR!
" WE THOUGHT HE WAS LYING--BUT EVERY SOURCE WE'VE UNCOVERED SINCE HAS TOLD THE SAME STORY."
YEAH, YEAH WE KNOW...OF THERMIE COMING TO EARTH...
...CREATING THE PAXIS TO FIGHT AGAINST TWO WARRING ALIEN RACES, blah blah blah.
TRES NORMAN ROCKWELL, BLISS. THIS'S ALL A BIG JOKE TO YOU, HUH?
PLEASE, ARMATA. WE'RE ALL AWARE THE PAXIS DROVE THE WARRING ALIENS FROM OUR WORLD, BEFORE THEY WERE DESTROYED THEMSELVES--
--AND ALL MEMORY OF THEM ERASED. BUT THAT'S NOT WHAT BOTHERS YOU.
YOU FEAR IF WHAT WE'VE LEARNED IS TRUE, THAT ESCHBACHER'S RESPONSIBILITY WAS TO RETURN THE POWERS!
AND THAT EVERY SECOND WE KEEP THEM, ANOTHER WORLD IS DYING UNDER THE HEEL OF THAT WAR MACHINE!
MAYBE IT DID BOTHER ME, BUT NO MORE. I'VE MADE UP MY MIND.
WE'RE GIVING THE POWERS BACK!

NO!
OMIGOD!
RELAX--I USED THE FLAT OF MY BLADE TO KNOCK 'EM BACK!
I KNOW HOW TO USE MY POWER...
SHWAK
...IT'S ALL OF YOU WHO DON'T GET IT!
YOU THOUGHT YOU'D GET SOME COOL ARMOR AND A BIG GUN, BECOME A GENIUS OVERNIGHT...
...AND SUDDENLY EVERY PERSON ON THE PLANET'D BE HAPPY?!
I GOT NEWS FOR YOU--THE PAXIS BATTLED THEIR WHOLE LIVES FOR CHANGE, AND ANOTHER GENERATION OF HEROES'LL DO BATTLE AFTER US!
ALL WE CAN HOPE TO DO IS OUR PART! AND THAT'S ENOUGH!
AS IT? IN THE FACE OF OTHER WORLDS, OTHER RACES BEING DESTROYED?
MAN, LOOK AROUND, LOGIX! YOU THINK OUR OWN PLANET AIN'T GOIN' TO HELL IN A HANDBASKET?
WE HAVE PROBLEMS...
AMOKK, YOU'RE JUST LIKE ESCHBACHER--AFRAID TO BE YOURSELF, ONE LITTLE MAN WITHOUT THE BULLETPROOF BLADES, FACING THOSE PROBLEMS!
YOU'RE ONE TO TALK, ALWAYS TELLING US WHAT TO DO, ACTING AS IF THESE'RE YOUR POWERS!
AND I DON'T NEED ANY OF YOU!
I DON'T NEED YOUR PERMISSION TO KEEP WHAT'S MINE!

FAITHFUL HEADQUARTERS, WHERE AMBERTRANCE FASIA, ONE OF THE ORIGINAL PAXIS, AWAITS A REVELATION...
BACK FOR ANOTHER PRACTICE SESSION SO SOON?
MORE THAN THAT, AMBER-TRANCE.
WE--WE'VE DISCUSSED IT AMONG OURSELVES AND, WELL...
WE THREE HAVE SOMETHING TO SHOW YOU...
FOR BETTER OR WORSE, IT'S TIME YOU KNEW THE TRUTH...
...OUR TRUTH!
YOUR HUMAN IDENTITIES? YOU'VE STILL PRESERVED THEM?!
FWASH
I'M LISA MOFFIT. ESCHBACHER GAVE ME THE KEY-- THE DAY LOGIX SHOWED HIS SMARTS BY DUMPING ME FOR THE MISFIT HERE...
LOGIX DIDN'T DO IT! IT WAS ME, KENNY ZAMBETTI. I NEEDED TIME TO LEARN WHO I WAS. I-- I'M NOT A HIGH SCHOOL JOCK ANYMORE.
AND I'M NO MISFIT! AT LEAST NOT THE WAY YOU MEAN, LISA! I--WELL, I CALL MYSELF DYAN DIVINE. I DANCE AT THE UNDERGROUND...
BUT WE'VE GOT BIGGER PROBLEMS TO SOLVE RIGHT NOW!
WE'VE GOT TO DECIDE, AMBER-TRANCE...
...DOES OUR PLANET NEED THESE POWERS--
--OR DO WE GIVE THEM BACK TO THERMAKK?
WELCOME, LISA...KENNY... DYAN...
...YOUR QUESTION IS A COURAGEOUS ONE...

THOSE STRANGE BLACK BLOBS THAT WE FOUGHT...! I THOUGHT THEY WERE MY FAULT!
NO, CHILD, ALTHOUGH YOUR POWER MAKES THEM VISIBLE. THEY'RE PUS FROM A WOUND OF THE SOUL.
ALMOST EVERY HUMAN ON EARTH IS LOOKING TO FULFILL A NEED--
THERE IS MUCH AT STAKE HERE-- AND YOU KNOW OUR WORLD HAS GREAT NEED OF THE QUO POWERS...
...FOR PARAGON JOHN HAS COMMITTED A HORRIBLE ATROCITY AGAINST THE SOULS OF ALL MANKIND!
IN HIS PATHETIC ANGER AND JEALOUSY, PARAGON JOHN USED HIS GENIUS TO BLOT OUT THE TRUTH. IF HE COULD NOT BE PAXIS, HE RESOLVED TO WIPE OUT THE MEMORY OF ALL SUPER HEROES!
HIS HYPNOTIC DRUG --ZONA-- COMBINED WITH A REVISED HISTORY BEAMED OVER THE AIR-WAVES -- LEFT A HOLE, A GAPING WOUND IN MEN'S SOULS...
THE TRAGIC EFFECTS OF THAT DIABOLICAL PLOT ARE ALL AROUND US TODAY...
--THEY'RE LOOKING FOR THE TRUTH! A LOGICAL VIEW OF REALITY!
YES, IN A WAY... BUT, FINDING ONLY A REALITY CONSTRUCTED BY THE PARAGON MEDIA EMPIRE, THEY TURN TO DESPERATE MEASURES...
PERHAPS NOT...
...BUT HE DOES INCREASE THEM, AND FEED ON THE RESULTS! ONLY WE FAITHFUL ARE LEFT TO FIGHT FOR TRUTH--
SURELY JOHN CAN'T BE RESPONSIBLE FOR ALL MANKINDS PROBLEMS!
BUT YOU NEED OUR HELP TO DO THAT, DON'T YOU?
YOU THINK WE NEED TO STAY HERE AND FIGHT--TO HELP PEOPLE RECOVER THEIR TRUE HISTORY, TO HEAL THEIR WOUNDS...?

" WHAT I THINK, CHILD, IS THAT YOU ARE A WONDERFUL WAY TO SHOW THE TRUTH--TO REVEAL THE LIES OF DARAGON JOHN...
"...BUT AS YOU NOW REALIZE, THERE ARE OTHER CONSIDERATIONS..."
KARANG
SURE--THE POWERS ARE FUN!
BUT THERE'S MORE TO IT THAN THAT--SO MUCH MORE!
DON'T YOU SEE, LISA? I'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO CHANGE THINGS -- TO DO GOOD!
FWASH
SOMEONE'S HERE--A GANGSTA?!
GOT TO TRANSF--
WHOA, BIG FELLA!
IT'S ME, CARLOS-- YOUR HOMBRE!
AND I WANT T'DO IT WITH YOU!
BUT NOW YOU THINK I DON'T CARE 'BOUT NOTHIN'...

SO--WHA'S UP?
YOU CAN CUT IT RIGHT NOW, GEORGE. I KNOW...
WHAT DO YOU MEAN? KNOW WHAT?
C'MON, GEORGE--I SAW THAT BLADES-DUDE! I KNOW YOU DON'T JUST COLLECT COMIC BOOKS--YOU ARE ONE, MAN! STRANGE VISITOR FROM ANOTHER PLANET AND ALL THAT JIVE!
CARLOS--IT'S SO MUCH MORE COMPLICATED THAN THAT! YOU'VE GOTTA SWEAR...SWEAR YOU'LL NEVER TELL ANYONE WHAT YOU KNOW. NOT A SOUL...
I PROMISE! I MEAN, WHAT SORT OF FRIEND AM I RIGHT? BESIDES, YOU'RE THE LUCKIEST DUDE ON THE PLANET!
MAN, WE'RE ON EASY STREET, NOW! ONE BANK JOB, AND WE CAN PAY BACK DEACON, GET HIM OFF OUR BACKS--
YOU JUST DON'T GET IT, DO YOU?!
YOU CAN'T JUST ACT THE THUG ALL YOUR LIFE--RUNNIN' WITH GANGS, PULLIN' PETTY CRIMES! TWO KIDS DIED TODAY--
--ONE OF THESE DAYS YOU'RE GONNA HAFTA TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR LIFE--OR YOU'LL BE THE NEXT CORPSE IN THE STREET!
I--I GET IT, OKAY?!
THAT LIFE'S NOT FOR ME, MAN! THESE ARE SERIOUS POWERS--AND IT'S UP T'ME T'USE 'EM T'MAKE THINGS BETTER!
OKAY! WHATEVER.
I'M JUST AS RESPONSIBLE AS THEY ARE--AND I'M GONNA MAKE LISA REALIZE IT IF IT'S THE LAST THING I DO!

THE THREAT POSED BY THE ANUBISTI AND HORUSIANS IS VERY REAL. HERE--WE SHOW THESE FILMS IN OUR ANTI-BRAINWASHING SESSIONS... PART OF THE FAITHFUL'S MISSION TO RESTORE THE TRUTH OF EARTH'S HISTORY!
"THESE PICTURES WERE TAKEN IN WORLD WAR ONE...
"...WHEN THE WARRING ALIENS THREATENED TO DECIMATE THE POPULATION OF EUROPE.
"THIS IS THE THREAT THE QUO CREATED THE PAXIS TO FIGHT. NEARLY A CENTURY AGO, PAXIS RESTORED PEACE BY FORCING THE HORDES OFF THIS WORLD.
"BUT THE WAR DIDN'T END.
"IN RECENT MONTHS, THEY'VE FOUND ANOTHER WORLD TO SERVE AS THEIR BATTLEFIELD.
"THESE IMAGES WERE BEAMED HERE FROM SIGMUS D IN THE ORION SYSTEM.
"THEY ARE WHAT SPARKED THERMAKK'S DEMAND FOR THE POWERS!"
TH-THAT'S HAPPENING ...NOW?
A WHOLE SPECIES, DUE FOR EXTINCTION, UNLESS THE QUO POWERS CAN STOP THEM!
WE DON'T REALLY HAVE A CHOICE, DO WE?
HORRENDOUS! BUT JUST WHERE DID AMBERTRANCE GET THESE VIDEOS...?
IT'S ALL OVER...
YEAH, I GUESS IT IS. LET'S LET IT SLIDE, OKAY?

... I MEAN, I'M SORRY I BLEW UP LIKE THAT. IT'S JUST I FELT LIKE YOU WERE TELLIN' ME I HAD TO GIVE THE POWERS UP!
YOU'VE... YOU'VE GOTTA UNDERSTAND THAT--
GEORGE, DIDN'T YOU SEE?
I JUST GOT HERE, MAN...
IT DOESN'T MATTER. WE DON'T HAVE A CHOICE ANY LONGER, GEORGE. WE'VE GOT TO SURRENDER THE POWERS.
I DON'T KNOW WHAT SHE'S BEEN FEEDING YOU--BUT WE DON'T GOTTA DO NOTHIN'!
YOU COULD HAVE IT ALL, KENNY--EVERYTHING I'VE EVER WANTED--BUT YOU JUST KEEP THROWING IT AWAY! WELL, LEAVE ME OUT OF IT!
BUT YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT WE DO, GEORGE--
I KNOW THIS TOWN IS NO SORT OF PLACE FOR MY FAMILY--MY FRIENDS--I'D TRY AND LIVE IN.
AND I KNOW I GOT THE POWER TO CHANGE THAT!
PLEASE, LISA--YOU UNDERSTAND...
GROW UP, GEORGE. KENNY'S RIGHT!
FWASH!
YEAH, KENNY'S ALWAYS RIGHT!

WELL NONE A'YOU KNOWS JACK ABOUT BEIN' HEROES! YOU'RE ALL COWARDS! QUITTERS!
YOU JUST DON'T HAVE THE HEART FOR THE JOB.
GEORGE-- LISTEN TO REASON!
KEY UP, KIDS--
--CAUSE WE'VE GOT ONE PEEVED-OFF SUPER HERO WANNABE!
WHAM
UNGH!
SLAMASH!!
HULK

"HULK SMASH!" IS THAT ALL YOU CAN THINK ABOUT, GEORGE?!
THE WORLD ISN'T A COMIC BOOK!
BLISS, YOU MAY PULL BOGUS IMAGES OUTTA MY DREAMS--BUT YOU AIN'T GOT A CLUE WHAT THEY REALLY ARE!
SLASH
AAAGHH! STOP! THE FEEDBACK! I CAN'T HOLD--
OYAN! I FORGOT! WHEN I RIP THROUGH YOUR DREAM PROJECTIONS...
OH...
...I DIDN'T MEAN...IT'S JUST--WHY WON'T ANYONE LISTEN TO ME?
AMOKK--PLEASE, JUST WATCH THE SCREEN!
GEORGE... FRIEND... PLEASE...

THE WAR IN OUR STREETS IS CONTAINED. IT'S NOT OVER -- NOT BY A LONG SHOT...
NO SPIT, SHERLOCK.
...BUT HOW CAN IT COMPARE...
...TO THIS?!
GOOD GOD...!
THE FOOTAGE IS FROM SIGMUS D IN THE ORION SYSTEM. YESTERDAY'S NEWS...
AND WHO WAS THE NEWSPAPER BOY?
ANY LIZARD GUY WE'VE HEARD OF?
YES, THE IMAGES WERE SENT TO THERMAKK'S SHIP FROM THE GUD, WHO MONITOR THE WAR.
THEN HOW CAN WE TRUST THEM?! PICTURES LIE THESE DAYS, YOU KNOW!
I KNOW MANDAMUS THERMAKK TO BE A CREATURE OF HONOR, CHILD.
BUT YOU'LL HAVE TO DECIDE THE TRUTH ON YOUR OWN. TO DO THAT, YOU MUST RESOLVE YOUR DIFFERENCES WITH THERMAKK.
AND I SHALL HELP YOU FIND HIM...

WHILE, IN AN EAST L.A. BACK ALLEY...
I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU'D DIS YOUR BUDDY CARLOS LIKE THAT, GEORGE. I'D NEVER TELL ANYBODY YOUR SECRET!
YOU'N'ME -- WE'VE BEEN THROUGH SO MUCH STUFF... SAVED EACH OTHER'S BUTTS...
...AND NOW YOU THINKIN' I'M NOTHIN' BUT STREET TRASH!
I'M A SURVIVOR -- THA'S ALL.
AN' WITH THE DEACON AN' HIS BOY OUT TO SMOKE ME, I'LL NEED EVERY EDGE I CAN...
WELL, YOU ARE A SURVIVOR, CARLOS.
WHO...?
DEACON!
NEED A HAND, LITTLE BROTHER?
EASY, CARLOS -- I KNOW I'VE MISJUDGED YOU. I BLAMED YOU FOR WHAT WENT DOWN WITH THAT COKE DELIVERY --
--BUT NOW I SEEN THOSE MONSTERS WITH MY OWN EYES, I UNDERSTAND.
OF COURSE, YOU'RE HERE RIGHT NOW -- AND I DON'T KNOW HOW TO FIND THAT THING AND HIS FRIENDS.
THAT THING -- THE ONE WITH BLADES FOR HANDS -- HE'S THE ONE WHO SCREWED UP THAT DELIVERY, ISN'T HE?
WELL, SOMEBODY OWES ME, CARLOS. IT CAN BE YOU -- OR HIM. I'LL HAVE MY SATISFACTION... ONE WAY OR ANOTHER.
Y-YES.
UNLESS YOU CAN TELL ME...

"THERMAKK HAS TAKEN SANCTUARY IN A MONASTERY... CALLED GYANGAZIN.
" THE MONKS AT THE QUO - ARTS MEDITATION CENTER CAN HELP YOU IN YOUR QUEST FOR THERMAKK...
"... THERMAKK AND THE FABLED PEACE OF QUO...
WELCOME, WELCOME, SEEKERS OF PEACE!
QUO HOLDS YOUR ANSWERS...
ANSWER ME THIS, BUDDY--
--WHERE'S THE LIZARD-GUY... THERMAKK?
WE HEARD HE MIGHT BE SOMEPLACE... CALLED GYANGAZIN...
GYANGAZIN LIES AT THE TOP OF MT. KONDUR, IN THE HIMALAYAS... MONASTERY THERE, MOST HOLY...
WELL, GANG -- THIS IS THE PLACE AMBERTRANCE SAID TO START LOOKING...
FWASH
WELL, SO AM I...
SO SORRY, GODDESS... NO MEAN TO OFFEND.
THE MASTER HEALS HIMSELF ON OTHER SIDE OF GREAT GATEWAY--
--BUT NO ONE MAY ENTER WITHOUT MASTER'S PERMISSION...
SO THERMIE DOESN'T WANT ME IN THERE, EH?
NO, GEORGE, DON'T--!
"STRENGTH AND GRACE... HYPERKIND..."

WOW! SOME KINDA INTER-DIMENSIONAL PORTAL! cool. WONDER HOW YOU TURN THIS SUCKER--
WITH A THOUGHT, THE HUGE MACHINERY SPARKS INTO LIFE--
--SUCKING GEORGE INTO A MAELSTROM!
OOOO

"WELL, GEORGE IS ENOUGH TO MAKE ME QUIT HYPER MANAGEMENT..."
SO THIS IS SCENIC MT. KONDUR, HUH? WISH I'D BROUGHT MY MITTENS...
C'MON, GANG! DON'T JUST LEAVE ME HERE!
ZMZMZM
THANKS A LOT, GEORGE.
THE MONKS' INFORMATION WAS CORRECT-- THERE'S A COMPLEX STRUCTURE AT A HIGHER ALTITUDE...
JUST A HOP, SKIP AND A JUMP-- IF YOU'RE A TELEPORTING GODZILLA FROM OUTER SPACE, LIKE THERMAKK!
WE'LL HAVE TO CLIMB IT--AND ANTICIPATE OUR POWER FORMS CAN PROTECT US FROM THE EXPOSURE.
WE'LL MAKE IT. WE'RE HYPERKIND!
YEAH, BUT THERMAKK'S OUR ONLY WAY OUT OF THIS PLACE...
DON'T REMIND ME...

MT. KONDHR'S EMBRACE IS A CRUEL ONE...
I'M READY WITH ANOTHER SPIKE! PLAY OUT SOME MORE DREAM-ROPE.
PCHOW
NOT A BAD TEAM, HUH ARMATA?
REASON DICTATES THAT THIS ROPE IS ONLY A FIGMENT OF OUR IMAGINATIONS...
...BUT AMBERTRANCE HAS TAUGHT THE NEO-PAXIS WELL!
CHOK
FIGMENT OR NOT, I WISH I COULD HOLD ONTA SOMETHIN', 'STEADA CLAWIN' MY WAY UP!

IT'S LIKE BEING ON TOP OF THE WORLD...
MORE LIKE WADIN' THROUGH A BANG SNOW-BANK!
THAT ARMOR OF YOURS IS SURPRISINGLY VERSATILE!
I'M JUST THAT KIND OF GIRL...
...WHENEVER YOU THINK I'VE REACHED MY LIMITS, THERE'S SOMETHING NEW...
YES--AS LONG AS YOU GET PLENTY OF REST, AND RECHARGE THOSE LIFE BATTERIES.
NO SKIS FOR YOU! AT THOUGHTSPEED, THERE WON'T BE TIME FOR YOU TO SINK INTO THE SNOW.
BLISS, YOU'RE SHIVERING! TOO BAD I CAN'T REMOVE THIS CAPE--IT'S LIKE, PART OF ME...
MY POWER PROTECTS ME MOSTLY... BUT...
...I GUESS MY POWER'S DESIGNED FOR L.A.--THE WIND... IT BLOWS RIGHT THROUGH ME.
THANKS, KENNY... I...
KHOOM
WHAT THE--?!
WARM YOURSELF UP, DYAN... AND WHEN YOU'RE READY TO GO, LET US KNOW.
I... I'LL LEAVE YOU TWO ALONE.
TH-THANKS.
SHE--SHE REALLY IS CHANGING.
WE'LL ARE...

A PASS IN THE ROCK! WE'RE ALMOST THERE...
"...TO GYANGAZIN..."
BY THE GODDESS!
SO BEAUTIFUL... LIKE SOMETHING FROM A DREAM...
A NIGHTMARE, YOU MEAN! THE KING 'A THIS CASTLE WANTS US FOR DINNER!
A THERMAL ROCKET-- CREATED BY AN UNDERGROUND SPRING OVER SOME KIND OF MAGMA SOURCE...
LET'S GO FIND THE TRUTH!
SO WE'RE REALLY INVISIBLE?
AMBERTRANCE SAYS IT'S MORE LIKE CAMOUFLAGE... I PROJECT A DREAM-IMAGE OF WHATEVER'S AROUND US, OVER OUR SKIN.
DOWN THERE! SOME KIND OF CULT CEREMONY...
...WITH THERMAKK AT CENTER-STAGE!

Silence...
...let the peace of my people, the Quo... take root in your hearts...your minds...
...in order to embrace that which...
...is not...
THIEVES! HERE!
DANG! HE'S SPOTTED US!
OOPS--I FORGOT TO HIDE OUR SHADOWS!
...YOU CHILDREN...
...YOU DARE TO DISTURB MY REST?!
I HAD HOPED TO FIND SOME PEACE BEFORE WE MET AGAIN...
BUT IF YOU SEEK RENEWED BATTLE, SO SOON...
SO BE IT!
WAIT! YOU DON'T UNDERST--
YAAAA!
KERRESH!

GUESS WHO?
BAH! YOU'VE STILL NO FORM OF MASTERY OVER YOUR POWERS... I...
HAH! YOU SEEK TO FLEE? FAR TOO LATE, WHELPS...
HE FELL FOR IT!
GOT TO HOLD THIS DREAM-SCREEN WHILE THE OTHERS REGROUP! LONG ENOUGH TO GET HIM TO...
SCORE ONE FOR BLISS-BABY!
KWAM
WHOOM
ROWR!
NO! YOU BLINDED ME WITH YOUR POWER-- JUST AN INCH BEFORE MY FACE!
AND DROVE YOU RIGHT INTO THE WALL! LIES'LL DO THAT--THAT'S WHY WE'RE HERE TO GET THE TRUTH, THERMAK'K!
HANG ON TO HIM, AMOKK! IF YOU'RE HOLDING ON, HE CAN'T TELEPORT AWAY FROM YOU!
AND THE TRUTH IS-- YOU'RE A DECEITFUL, MANIPULATIVE, ALIEN DEATH-DEALER!
TELL 'EM! TELL 'EM!

YOU CAN HOLD ME IN THIS SHAPE, BUT MY OTHER ATOMS WILL NOT BE CAPTURED SO EASILY!
AND THAT'S THE EVENTUALITY I'M PREPARING FOR.
GOT TO STRETCH MY CAPE...INTO A MONO-FILAMENT THIN STREAM OF DIGITAL DATA.
COMPUTING LOOP SUBROUTINE--ONE THOUSAND ITERATIONS.
MORPH TO A LARGER SIZE NOW, THERMAKK--AND PREPARE TO BE CUT INTO RIBBONS!
NO! HOW HAVE YOU MASTERED THE POWERS IN ONLY TWO FORTNIGHTS?!
THANKS A LOT, PAL! COULDN'T YA HAVE LEFT ME OUTTA THIS?
LOOK--WE JUST WANT TO TALK WITH YOU. WE'VE BEEN DOING SOME THINKING...
THEY'VE BEEN DOIN' SOME THINKING! I'VE ALREADY FIGURED YOU FOR A STINKIN' LIAR!
WELL, THERMAKK CAN'T HIDE THE TRUTH--
--FROM ME!

MANDAMUS THERMAKK--THIS IS YOUR LIFE!
WITH A MOTION, ALL OF THERMAKK'S DREAMS--
--AND NIGHTMARES OF HISTORY ARE OPENED, PROJECTED FOR ALL TO SEE.
YOUR DESTINY IS AT HAND...
NO, WAIT--I DON'T WANT--
TO CONTROL THIS, YOU'VE BEEN CHOSEN TO HOUSE THE VIOLENT IMPULSES OF OF YOUR PEOPLE...
THE HORUSIANS AND ANUBISTI THREATEN THE MILLENNIA LONG PEACE OF THE QUO!
"...VESSEL FOR THOSE DARK URGES FOREVER REJECTED BY OUR KIND!
YOU WILL EMPOWER OTHERS TO PROTECT THE INNOCENTS OF THEIR WORLDS...
"... WHILE NEVER HINDERING THE WAR. FOR THIS WE DICTATE: THE WAR MUST NOT END!
"IN EXILE, UNDER PENALTY OF DEATH, YOU MUST FIGHT AS OUR LONE WARRIOR--TO PRESERVE THE UNIVERSE!"
THEY SENT YOU TO DO THEIR DIRTY WORK--
--BUT WOULDN'T LET YOU END THE WAR?!
WHY?!
THAT'S HARSH! BUT NOT OUR RESPONSIBILITY! KEEPING A WAR GOING IS A LOUSY USE OF THESE POWERS!
BUT WHAT OF THE INNOCENT LIVES AT STAKE?
IS THAT ALSO "NOT YOUR RESPONSIBILITY?

BACK IN L.A.--
I BEEN PLAYIN' GAMES LONG ENOUGH CARLOS.
I WANT ANSWERS!
I LIKE YOU, KID. I COULD GET YOU THINGS, MOVE YOU HIGH UP IN MY ORGANIZATION...
LEMME SAVE YOUR LIFE - GIVE ME YOUR SECRETS.
DEACON!
KROOM
I'M SORRY, GEORGE--
GIVE YOU THE KINDA LIFE YOU DREAM ABOUT... MY LIFESTYLE... ALL FOR JUST A LITTLE INFORMATION...
MADAME WOE WARNED YOU NOT TO CROSS HER! SHE ORDERED THE PHARAOHS DEAD!
YOU FAILED, DEACON... AND FAILURE ISN'T TOLERATED!
brattabrattabratta
WHERE?! WHERE CAN WE FIND THEM?
NOW... GOTTA MAKE A BREAK!
KRSH
ALMOST HAD ME, DEACON... BUT I SEE WHAT KINDA "LIFESTYLE" YOU GOT.
A SHORT ONE!
YOU WON'T MAKE ME DOUBT MYSELF AGAIN...

"ONE OF THESE DAYS YOU'RE GONNA HAFTA TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR LIFE"--
--WASN'T THAT WHAT I TOLD CARLOS?
NO, I CAN'T JUSTIFY KEEPING THE POWERS-- BUT CAN YOU JUSTIFY KILLING ESCHBACHER?
HE ONLY WANTED TO DO GOOD--SAME AS US!
THEN PERHAPS YOU NEED TO SPEAK WITH ESCHBACHER HIMSELF. WILL THAT EASE YOUR MIND...?
ECKA!
THE POSSESSOR OF UNIVERSAL CONSCIOUSNESS, THE FIFTH POWER?
THE SAME.
FWASH
I'VE BEEN OBSERVING YOU FOR WEEKS, THERMAKK.
I SEE THE JUSTICE OF YOUR MISSION, AND THE FOLLY.
HE--HE'S FREEING US!
A PART OF ESCHBACHER STILL RESIDES IN THE PAXIS COMPUTER. THERE LIES THE NEXT STEP IN BOTH YOUR JOURNEYS.
THIS IS NOT A SMALL DECISION. THE BALANCE OF WHOLE WORLDS ARE AT STAKE HERE--MORE THAN ANY OF YOU REALIZE...
"...THESE FOUR YOUNG HUMANS MUST CHOOSE THEIR OWN WAY, THERMAKK...MAKE THEIR OWN DESTINY.
"PREPARE YOUR SHIP, THERMAKK. WE RETURN ...TO THE SARCOPHAGI."

THE PAXIS LABORATORY, HIDDEN WITHIN THE HELIOPOLIS CINEMA ON HOLLYWOOD BOULEVARD...
WITHIN THESE FIVE SARCOPHAGI ARE YOUR FATES.
DEEP INSIDE THE COMPUTER, ESCHBACHER'S SPIRIT NOW REIGNS. GIVE HIM MY LOVE.
BUT WHAT ABOUT YOU? AREN'T YOU GOIN' IN WITH US?
MY GIFT OF COSMIC CONSCIOUSNESS ALLOWS ME TO RELEASE MY POWERS AT WILL.
I WILL STAND GUARD OVER YOU--AND INSURE THAT THE DECISION RESTS IN YOUR HANDS--
--NOT HIS...
I ALREADY KNOW WHAT I'LL DECIDE.
I'M NOT GIVIN' UP...
WILL--WILL YOU ALL STILL BE MY FRIENDS... IF WE'RE NOT A TEAM ANYMORE?
WE'VE BEEN THROUGH A LOT TOGETHER, BLISS. I THINK WE'LL HANG IN THROUGH A LOT MORE.
DON'T BUY INTO IT, BLISS--ESCHBACHER'LL CONVINCE YOU, I KNOW!
BUT JUST IN CASE...THERE'S SOMETHIN' I GOTTA DO...
...WHILE I STILL HAVE THE BESTIAL COURAGE...
WE ALWAYS TRIED TO DO THE RIGHT THING, YOU KNOW...
...BUT YOU, THERMAKK--YOU'RE HEARTLESS.

I SENSE... MY ENEMY!
THERMAKK-- FATHER, KILLER, BEAST! WHY HAVE YOU COME HERE, TO MY SANCTUARY?!
AH-- BUT YOU WOULD NOT DARE INVADE THE PAXIS CYBER-DOMAIN...
...FOR HERE ESCHBACHER RULES SUPREME!
A-ARE WE DEAD? IS THIS HEAVEN?
NOT QUITE. THIS IS SOME KIND OF DATA-WORLD-- BUT NOT IN BINARY CODE!
YOUR SCANS--LOGIX, CAN YOU TELL WHERE THESE GLOWING WIRES LEAD?
DON'T LOOK NOW-- BUT HERE COMES YOUR ANSWER!
...WHERE WILL FORMS MY CIRCUITS-- AND GOALS MY ELECTRICITY!
WELCOME, HYPERKIND, TO MY CYBER-REALM...
E-ESCHBACHER-- WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE POWERS. WERE THEY YOURS TO GIVE OR DID YOU--
--STEAL THEM...?
DON'T GET HIM ANGRY!
WE NEED TO KNOW... IS IT TRUE? DID YOU TAKE THESE POWERS AWAY FROM THE QUO?
THERMAKK CLAIMED OTHER WORLDS MIGHT PERISH WITHOUT THEM-- BUT WHAT MATTER?
HUMANKIND MUST TAKE PRECEDENCE OVER ALIEN FILTH! SUCH IS OUR DESTINY!
THE QUO NEVER UNDERSTOOD THE PROPER USE OF THEIR GREATNESS! THEIR PEACE IS A LIE!
BUT NOW THAT YOU CAN VISIT ME HERE, WE CAN PROPERLY BEGIN YOUR TRAINING--YOU WILL LEARN THE TRUTHS ONLY I CAN GIVE!

YOU SET US UP!
WE'RE NOT HEROES--JUST ACCOMPLICES IN SOME EARTH SUPREMACIST PLAN TRIP OFF THE QUO!
BUT DON'T YOU SEE? WITHOUT THESE POWERS, HOW WILL EARTH EVER REGAIN ITS STRENGTH?
FWAM
KLOOM
EARTH IS ONLY PART OF A GREATER UNIVERSE! HOW CAN WE BE HEROES IF WE HELP OURSELVES--AT THE EXPENSE OF OTHERS?
I NEVER SHOULD HAVE BELIEVED YOU!
BUT WE'RE NOT GOING TO BE YOUR PAWNS ANY LONGER!
ZZTT
GETTING THE POWERS FROM YOU CHEAPENS THEM!
THEY'RE PAID FOR IN TOO MUCH INNOCENT BLOOD!
LOGIX IS RIGHT! WE'RE GIVING THE POWERS BACK--TO THERMAKK!
NOOOOOOO!

I AM LORD HERE--
--AND IF YOU CHILDREN WILL NOT SERVE YOUR MASTER...
...THEN I SHALL STRIP THE QUO POWERS FROM YOU--
--AND GIVE THEM TO MORE... REASONABLE ALLIES!
SOME KIND OF... MASS...
DOWNLOAD...

HAHAHA!
THOSE WIRES SUCKING OUR POWERS FROM US...
...LOSING COHERENCE...
HE--HE'S UNSTOPPABLE!
HE'LL EAT US ALIVE, UNLESS...
RAGH!
SMASH!
THESE DATA WIRES-- THAT'S HOW YOU CONTROL EVERYTHING, ISN'T IT?!
WELL, YOU'RE NOT CONTROLLING ME!
AHGH!
HE'S DONE IT! HE'S INTERRUPTED THE POWER FLOW AND SHORT-CIRCUITED ESCHBACHER!
OUR POWERS ARE RETURNING TO US--THROUGH HIM!
GEORGE... GEORGE!
BUT THERE IS NO ANSWER... AS THE PAXIS COMPUTER REACHES--

--OVERLOAD!
POWER! LIKE I'M SUPER-CHARGED!
THESE NEW DUDS ARE STYLIN'!
I AIN'T DOWN FOR THE COUNT--
--NOW THAT I CAN COUNT--
--AT LEAST TO THREE...
WE ARE TRANSFORMED ANEW--
--BUT WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO AMOKK?
...I'M BACK, BIGGER AND BADDER THAN EVER!
BUT THE QUO MACHINERY...!
DESTROYED! NOW THE POWERS CAN NEVER BE TRANSFERRED! ALL... ALL IS LOST!
THE POWERS STILL EXIST-- IN THE BODIES OF THE HYPERKIND.
SURELY THE QUO CAN CREATE NEW EQUIPMENT TO TRANSFER THEM...
IT'S TOO MUCH TO ASK! RETURNING TO QUO WOULD MEAN THERMAKK'S DEATH--HE'S FOUGHT LONG ENOUGH...
NO, YOU CAN'T ASK. BUT I CAN OFFER. IF YOU AGREE TO THE JOURNEY, I... WILL TAKE YOU...
IT'S NOW OR NEVER...
LOOK OUT, EVIL ALIENS-- 'CAUSE HERE COME THE HYPERKIND!

THE THEATRES OF HOLLYWOOD HAVE SEEN MANY SPECIAL EFFECTS...
...BUT NONE AS ASTOUNDING AS THAT WHICH NOW LIGHTS THE SKY ABOVE THE HELIOPOLIS CINEMA!
YOU CAN'T RUN, CARLOS-- THAT LITTLE SCENE WAS JUST A DELAY TO YOUR HOUR O' JUDGMENT!
I WANT TO KNOW...
SO THAT'S THE ANSWER! THEY'RE ALIENS-- THAT'S WHAT YOU WERE SCARED TO TELL ME!
BUT THAT MAKES GEORGE-- MY FAVORITE MARTIAN?! NO... I DON'T BELIEVE IT...
CINEMA
MY QUESTION'S BEEN ANSWERED --BUT MY OFFER STILL STANDS, CARLOS...
...MADAME WOE WANTS YOUR CORPSE-- WE'VE SOMEHOW GOT A GANG WAR ON OUR HANDS--
--BUT IF YOU WANT THE EDEN HOUSE PROJECTS FOR YOUR TURF, WE'LL PROTECT YOU FROM HER.
THEN NO ONE COULD BUY OR SELL THE ROCK WITHOUT GOIN' THROUGH YOU FIRST. YOU'D BE THE MAN...
NO THANKS, DEACON. THERE ARE OTHER WORLDS UP THERE--FLYIN' SAUCERS, ALIENS, AND THAT...
...BUT ALL WE DO HERE ON THE GROUND IS WALLOW IN MISERY!
I THINK IT'S TIME I FOUND MYSELF SOMETHIN' BIGGER TO BELIEVE IN...

WHILE, INSIDE...
THOUGH THEY'LL NOT UNDERSTAND MY ACTIONS...
...I STILL MUST SEND THEM TO THEIR GREATER DESTINY!
AND NOW COMES THE PART IN THIS DRAMA THAT ONLY I CAN PLAY!
NO! THE DOG! STILL LOYAL TO ESCHBACHER! IT HAS BETRAYED US!
THROWN LIGHT YEARS OFF-COURSE, THE QUO SHIP APPEARS, NOT AT ITS INTENDED DESTINATION ON QUO...
...BUT IN THE WAR-TORN ORION SYSTEM, INTO THE HEART OF THE ANUBIST/HORUSIAN WAR!
WILL THIS BE THE END OF THE HYPERKIND?! CHECK OUT THE NEXT HYPERKIND SPECIAL!
IN THE MEANTIME, SEND YOUR LETTERS AND COMMENTS TO:
HYPERKIND
96/MARVEL COMICS
387 PARK AVENUE SOUTH
NEW YORK, NY 10016
or e-mail to
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For Don Thompson...who made the world safe for heroes.

"Ritual"

BY FRANK LOVECE

He was bleeding.

Trip hadn't expected it. He'd felt the tang of metal against flesh, felt it all the way up his arm like ice-cube ants exploding along its length. But now to see blood that had been safe inside veins and arteries, enclosed and protected, it stunned him, as if he somehow had never seen blood before.

But there it was. Gorkill was bleeding.

Eyes like angry suns, Gorkill leapt, aiming for the weapon in Trip's hand. The weapon—it had no name, it barely had a shape—was a bludgeoning blade, two feet long and heavy as an anvil.

Indigo blood, spurting from Gorkill's mouth, left a trail in the air, seeming to defy gravity, before falling to the dirt. Gorkill moved that fast. But Trip had learned things. Gorkill had taught him. Trip swiftly shifted his weight, leaning back as Gorkill thrust, and swept him off his feet with a clean, sharp kick to the knees. Gorkill, anticipating, rolled harmlessly into the dirt, and swiftly jabbed a foot toward the tender spot between Trip's legs. And Trip, parrying, *transformed* his weapon into a saucer-sized plate, slicing it through the air with balletic grace to intercept Gorkill's clanging kick.

The afternoon wore on: A human granted power to transform unliving matter, versus an angry alien warrior, two chess pieces in perpetual motion, each avoiding capture by a single jump, again and again, on their way toward the inevitable draw.

But this draw was different. This draw, Trip had reaped first blood.

* * *

July 6:

It's been three days now, but I can't get it out of my mind. Maybe writing it down will help.

I made him bleed.

That's never happened before. The scar is still there on Gorkill's face, where I slashed him. And him, he acts like everything's normal and that's just the way it's done. He thinks he's some kind of drill instructor, like, what, Louis Gossett in "An Officer and a Gentleman." I guess that makes me Richard Gere, but I don't see no Debra Winger here, let alone Cindy Crawford.

Oh man oh man oh man. They say writing a journal helps you get your head straight. But this feels more like talking to yourself and then leaving behind the proof that you're crazy.

It's been months now since Gorkill and I survived that bloodbath with Bloodshed, the "champion" of the interdimensional war-god, Felon Bale. (I can't believe I'm using words like "interdimensional war-God." I'm a struggling stand-up comic from New York, The Real World. Inter-dimensional war-gods aren't supposed to exist in The Real World. But hey, of course there should be inter-dimensional war-gods to make my life complicated.)

Things could be worse, I guess. Fighting Bloodshed, I found out what it's like to be heart-dead but not brain-dead (no matter what my critics say). And I'm finally reconciled to the fact that I'm "Earth's Champion" against Bale's interdimensional horde, the Corpii — who, thank God, can only invade one-at-a-time since they can't just, like, charter a bus here. Hey, I've even got one of them on my side. Gorkill and I may not be exactly friends, but he's okay for a grouchy, cynical, seen-it-all high-tech barbarian with an attitude as bad as his breath.

(Oh, right. Like I should be writing this where he can see it...)

Gorkill, I'll give him credit, has gotten me in the best shape of my life, such as it is. He's taught me some other-dimensional judo-thing that's sort of like The Three Stooges on a sugar rush, and he's gotten me exercising, into weight training, off meat and onto organic foods. I draw the line at coffee, though. Nobody touches my coffee.

This is boot camp, and I'm not looking forward to finishing it. But I've got to. I don't think I'll be able to count on the military or the government or anybody for help against the Corpii. Nobody's taken the few sightings seriously—the Corpii are really good at being discreet and, hey, who believes in little green men from Mars anyway?

I hear Gorkill calling. Time for a nice, leisurely 12-mile run. Then we spar again. Ugh.

I know how far he wants to take this, but I'm not prepared to do what he wants. I may be learning the skills, but not the way a warrior thinks. And I won't. I am not a killer. I'm not going to let him turn me into one.

Besides which, I've pretty much lost my powers anyway.

Oh, yeah—did I mention that?

* * *

The shack belonged to Trip's estranged father, who'd decided to spend the summer tooling around the country with his wife, Jimi, on a Harley-Davidson the size of Ecuador. The place was a white-trash fortress at the end of a dirt road, miles from the nearest redneck, hidden by thick strands of fir trees. Nearby the shack stood an old, dilapidated barn and a hog pen and a chicken run, all empty, on 200 acres of weedy nothing.

The barn still held old tools and implements, most of them rusted and useless. Trip had gone exploring in the mildewed husk the day he and Gorkill arrived, searching for the wallboard where, at age six, he'd written his name in black tar, trying to declare a bit of permanence in case his father's beatings ever killed him. Looking for it dazedly in the barn's upper loft, lost in his trip down memory sewer, he didn't notice the rotted floorboard until after his leg had crashed through.

Thinking without thinking, he transformed the heavy iron anvil in his hands into a smooth, sharp pole that hit the floor, embedding itself into the concrete below the wood.

Scrambling, panicking, trying not to fall, Trip pinwheeled his arms for something, anything, to grab onto. The anvil was the closest thing, a worse choice than nothing. Not only didn't it stop him from crashing through, it fell through with him. Trip would've been amused at the Wile E. Coyote-ness of it all, if it weren't for the fact he was about to be killed.

Thinking without thinking, he transformed the heavy iron anvil in his hands into a smooth, sharp pole that hit the floor, embedding itself into the concrete below the wood. Trip, clutching it, spun round and round, lower and lower, until he safely settled onto the ground, so dizzy he wanted to vomit, but safe. Alive.

He'd shape-shifted the anvil. This was the power given him by Godkin Straith, to use as earth's champion against Felon Bale's invasion. He was supposed to have the power all his life. But when does life end? At cessation of heartbeat? Of brain waves? And for how long? The doctors might jolt you back on the operating table after a second of brain-death, but what about two seconds? Five? Twenty?

Fighting Bloodshed, Trip had died by at least one definition. Most of his power died that day as well. When Trip came jolting back, it did not come back with him.

Changing the anvil took the last of it. In the following sweltering days, he found he could use and re-use that final bit of power on this one object only, and only then to change its shape, not its mass or composition.

Trip made a mental note not to ever, ever misplace it.

* * *

Sept. 1:

Dad's coming back after Labor Day. Gorkill and I have to be out of here by then. S'okay by me. It's fine. It's time. The money from my TV appearance is almost gone, and I still don't know how I'm going to make a living when I get back home to New York — "Earth's champion" seems to be an unsalaried position.

The training has gotten more intense. There's no time for anything but eat, sleep, train. I go into town once a week for groceries, but otherwise, I haven't seen another human in months.

Sometimes, I don't even feel human myself.

Gorkill keeps pushing me harder and harder. I don't like that I'm liking this. I can't do what he wants me to. I won't.

Still... Gorkill's adapting to Earth mores. He's trying, he really is. He's found a convicted murderer, in a prison not fifty miles from here. The guy's just waiting for execution anyway. Gorkill says our breaking into the prison to snatch him is just...

NO!!!! What am I saying? I AM A HUMAN BEING! I AM NOT A CORPII! I AM *FIGHTING* THE CORPII.

I'm scared. I want to defend Earth. I want to do what I have to. No one else can, I know that. But why am I doing it if I'm going to become like the very thing I'm fighting against?

Do I have what it takes? Do I have what it takes?

Trip and Gorkill stood in darkness on Labor Day night, the only light coming from an oil lamp in the barn.

The murderer, one Jake Borham, was with them — a killer who'd used his years in prison to pump his body into monstrous proportions, his eyes showing no more remorse than a shark's. The newspapers tomorrow would report his "impossible escape" on this crowded holiday visiting-day at the prison, and unconfirmed stories about two "space aliens" by doubtlessly lying inmates.

Gorkill, the unearthly referee, tossed a loaded, two-barreled shotgun into Borham's hands, then vanished into the shadows. Borham cocked and aimed. He didn't even hesitate.

He stood at one point of a triangle. At another corner stood Trip, sweating lava, his heart a kettledrum in his ears. And at the final corner stood Gorkill, some alien impossible thing that kept looking more human the more you stared at it.

Borham, the papers had said, had tortured and brutalized an 11-year-old girl, leaving her remains in a ditch. He'd left another girl for dead, her arms and legs broken, but she'd survived and identified him. He'd been tried and found guilty. He was awaiting execution. And now he found himself in gladiatorial combat.

Trip didn't move. The weapon he'd taken to keeping in his hand was absently morphing from one form to another. In his mind, Trip desperately went over the facts one last time. He thought about the dead girl's last moments, how desperately she must have begged Borham not to kill her. An 11-year-old child, powerless against a grown man beating her with piston-like fists until she died.

Trip couldn't think of him as a man. Borham was a monster, an inhuman creature, conscienceless. He had no reason to be alive.

Almost without his willing it, the weapon in Trip's hand became a blade-edged hammer. The man would be dead before he knew it.

Gorkill, the unearthly referee, tossed a loaded, two-barreled shotgun into Borham's hands, then vanished into the shadows. Borham cocked and aimed. He didn't even hesitate.

And neither, to his surprise, did Trip.

* * *

Labor Day:

It's over. I've done what I had to.

For the first time in my life, I know what it is like to kill. I've learned what I was capable of. I know like I know there's ground beneath my feet, I know that I can kill in combat.

But nowhere else. I am a human being. I am not a Corpii. I am *fighting* the Corpii.

It's funny. After I subdued the guy, I told Gorkill I was taking Borham back to prison. And that if Gorkill tried to stop me, made me try to kill this human, then I would kill *him*. Gorkill, I mean.

He just looked at me. I don't know what I saw in his eyes — pride? Surprise? I don't know.

All I know is, I've passed my test. ■